

All across the globe, the number of people who are obese is increasing dramatically. Over 300 million adults are obese in the world. It used to be that underweight individuals were globally more prevalent. Now it is nearly split down the middle between those who are underweight and those who are obese. With obesity being the growing issue that it is, there is also the issue of eating disorders. Four out of 100 girls will end up having an eating disorder when they are teenagers (Dunlevy, par. 4). With the constant pictures of skeleton-like celebrities and advertisements for the latest diets, self-esteems are at a new low. Body acceptance and comfort should be a bigger target than needing to be an “ideal” weight. Although body types are genetically decided, people always feel societal pressures to change and become thinner than they are truly meant to be. These pressures are, in most cases, worse than the actual being overweight because of the body image and self-esteem problems they cause.

Obesity is defined in the *Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology* as “a condition of having an excess accumulation of fat in the body, resulting in a body weight that is at least 20 percent above normal when measured against standard tables of optimal weight ranges according to age, sex, height, and body type.” Those who are 20 percent overweight are defined as being slightly obese, 40 percent overweight are moderately obese, and 50 percent overweight are morbidly obese (Obesity, par. 2). In the United States, almost one third of Americans are obese (AOA?? par. 1). In the entire world, there are 300 million obese adults according to the World Health Organization as quoted on the American Obesity Association’s webpage. “Children of obese parents have been found to be 13 times more likely than other children to be obese, suggesting a genetic predisposition to body fat accumulation” (Obesity, par. 3).

The National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) is an association that strives to have people of all sizes be accepted in today's society. The NAAFA has conventions each year where advocates to end discrimination against fat people gather to share stories of discrimination as well as sharing hope to end that discrimination. In Mary Ray Worley's experience at a NAAFA convention, she learned highly valuable information from a speaker there, Dr. Diane Budd.

There are no data that indicate (a) that such efforts [to lose weight] are likely to be effective (in fact, more than 90 percent of those who lose weight gain it back), (b) that a person's overall health would be improved by losing weight, or (c) that the efforts to lose weight won't in fact turn out to have lasting harmful effects on one's appetite, metabolism, and self-esteem (493).

Obesity can be caused by several things. It can be caused by something physiological like a glandular problem or something wrong with the hypothalamus. The *Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology* mentions one particular issue with the hypothalamus, "individuals with a low production of the hormone thyroxin tend to metabolize food slowly, which results in excess unburned calories" (par 4). However, a lot of obesity cases are caused by overeating. Overeating can be caused by both biological and psychological qualities. "People may eat compulsively to overcome fear or social maladjustment, express defiance, or avoid intimate relationships" (Gale, par 5). Research has shown that there are also physical reasons for overeating, such as the lack of certain neurotransmitters. There is also a possibility of a higher stopping place for different body types "ideal" weight, which could increase the appetite of people who are obese. This

certain stopping place may be from genetics or feeding habits starting in infancy. “Lack of exercise and sedentary living also contribute to obesity” (Gale, par 5).

According to Chris Ng, a personal trainer, interviewed by Bonnie Wu, “weight does not indicate anything about our muscle mass, percentage body fat, or fat distribution” (par. 5). It is not true that there is one “ideal” weight for everyone in one age group and certain height. Beliefs such as these influence people to try to drop to a weight level that may not be right for them and by dropping this weight; they put themselves at risk with their health. New ways are developing and being used to test health levels that do not just depend upon weight.

The American Heart Association has begun using the body mass index (BMI) to measure health. The BMI measures one’s frame through height and weight, but if one has a very large or very small frame it may not be accurate for determining one’s health. Using body fat percentages along with the BMI is an effective way to have more informed goals for one’s health. More focus should be put on health in today’s society, instead of just on weight.

In the NAAFA’s Policy on Dieting and the Diet Industry, the NAAFA defines dieting “as any attempt to achieve or maintain lower body weight by intentionally limiting or manipulating the amount or type of food intake.” Studies have shown that people whose weight increases or decreases often throughout their lives have a much higher chance of dying young than those who maintain a regular weight, even if it is significantly higher than the norm (Herald, par. 5). Diets rarely have permanent effects; most people gain the weight they lose through dieting back within five years. The “NAAFA strongly condemns any diet marketing strategy based on guilt and fear. Such

approaches cause untold suffering to fat people by ruining their self-esteem and by perpetuating negative stereotypes” (NAAFA, 489). Some doctors constantly tell their patients that their health issues, no matter what those issues may be, are all attributed to their obesity. People like these doctors are the types that fuel the societal obsession with being thin.

Nowadays we are bombarded daily with millions of pictures of skeleton-like celebrities and the latest tips to “shed weight without exercise.” These advertisements aid in the beginning of severe self-esteem issues with our society, especially with young girls, who are more vulnerable. These self-esteem issues are where eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa begin. Anorexia nervosa is when a person refuses to eat any or little food. An anorexic will weigh much less than their age group should and may be set back developmentally. Anorexics will deny all of the risks they face from being so far underweight and no matter their size, they will be afraid of being fat. Anorexia can also be paired with compulsive exercising, which is not yet a termed eating disorder, but a growing problem with today’s youth. Bulimia nervosa is when a person will reduce how much food they eat, get hungry, eat a large amount of food in a short amount of time (also known as binge-eating), then they will make themselves get rid of the food. Bulimics feel guilty for their binge-eating and will try to get rid of the food as soon as possible, whether by vomiting, abusing laxatives, compulsive exercising or fasting. It is harder to visibly tell if someone is bulimic unless one catches them actually getting rid of the food or finding evidence of their doing so because they may be of a normal weight, unless they are also anorexic. Although eating disorders are such a big problem, childhood obesity is growing quickly.

(Table 1, *Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology*)

OBESITY IN ADOLESCENT YOUTHS (AGES 6 TO 17) IN THE UNITED STATES	
Prevalence of overweight	Doubled since 1965
Number who are overweight	4.7 million
Percent who are overweight	11 percent
Related disorders	Elevated blood cholesterol; high blood pressure; increased adult mortality
Social consequences	Excluded from peer groups, discriminated against by adults, experience psychological stress, poor body image, and low self-esteem.

Recent research with animals shows that there may be a so-called “fat gene” which would mean that a person with that particular gene would be born with a much higher level of fat cells than the norm. “However, the generational transmission of obesity may be as cultural as it is genetic, as early feeding patterns may produce unhealthy eating habits” (Gale, par 3). As seen in table 1, obesity in children has doubled since 1965. This table also shows the problems that obese children face both physically and socially. The psychological problems caused by being an obese child are also shown in table 1, but it does not have examples from problems seen later in life, resulting from childhood obesity. New studies prove that children have a slower metabolism when watching television than when they are resting. In front of the television is also where many children eat the most. “Unhealthy eating patterns and behaviors associated with obesity can be addressed by programs in nutrition, exercise and stress management involving both children and families” (Gale, par 7). Although these unhealthy eating habits and the lack of exercise do contribute to child obesity, one must remember the different genetic body types and how some children are predisposed to being bigger.

Self-dissatisfaction is starting earlier and earlier with children and if parents do not notice it in their child, big issues can arise. In Lori Tharp's article, "I Love You Just the Way You Are" from *Essence* magazine, Connie Sobczak, a founder of a healthy body image promoting organization addresses this issue, "poor body image is linked to drug and alcohol use . . . eating disorders can also result when a child is unhappy with her physical self" (par 4). Children learn a lot from their parents as well as the things they say about themselves and other people. Parents must make an effort to make their children satisfied with their appearances and self-esteem. Although children will nevertheless feel some omniscient pressure from the media about the way they look, there are ways to get them involved in activities to make them proud of whom they are.

Also in Tharp's article, she addresses the ways to improve body image:

Fitness, exercise and sports participation can enhance mental health by offering adolescent girls positive feelings about body-image, improved self-esteem, tangible experiences of competency and success and increased self confidence.

Preliminary research suggests the same positive body confidence for boys involved in sports (par 12).

Schools are acknowledging the differences that physical activity makes in both fighting childhood obesity and raising body image. Some schools are implementing college-like course choices, such as basketball, rock-climbing or yoga. These course choices allow students to take classes that they enjoy and are interested in, rather than just the regular physical education classes that are required. A statistic that is not widely known: "physical activity programs are linked to stronger academic achievement, increased concentration and improved math, reading, and writing test scores" (Shaver, par. 44).

Also another little known statistic, “students participating in daily physical education exhibit better attendance, a more positive attitude about school and superior academic performance” (Shaver, par. 45).

The dangers of obesity are often ignored and quite underestimated. Obesity comes with problems such as high blood pressure (hypertension), arthritis, high cholesterol, diabetes, among many other illnesses. One such illness is metabolic syndrome (MTS). An article from the *Global News Wire* entitled “Beware: Obesity Can Be a Time Bomb” says “the metabolism of MTS sufferers increasingly veers off course and could lead to a heart attack or stroke” (par. 3). MTS is caused by obesity, along with high blood pressure and high levels of sugar and fat in the blood. Obesity especially is a cause, if fat deposits around the internal organs. Also in the article, Professor Markus Hanefield, who studies metabolic syndrome, was quoted “people with MTS are at a considerably greater risk of developing diabetes” (par. 6). Diabetes and obesity can raise blood pressure and hypertension increases the risk for heart disease and heart attacks. A lot about metabolic syndrome is still unknown, in fact, as of yet it does not even have a medical definition. Professor Alfred Wirth was quoted by the *Global News Wire* as saying that there was no such thing as a healthy fat person, “only a fat person who hasn’t fallen ill yet” (par. 14).

Instead of focusing on all of the illnesses and problems being obese can create, why not put more effort into treating obesity and getting people healthy? In the *Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology* it states:

The most effective treatment of obesity includes both the reduction of surplus body fat and the elimination of causative factors, and is best accomplished under

medical supervision. An appropriate weight loss plan includes exercise (which burns calories without slowing metabolism), reduced food intake, behavior modification to change food-related attitudes and behavior, and psychotherapy if there is underlying psychological causes for overeating. Other possible treatment measures include hormone therapy, appetite-suppressant drugs, and surgical intervention to alter satiety signals by reducing the size of the stomach and intestines (par 6).

Although there are many different treatments, it is so hard to get rid of obesity in adult; therefore, more measures should be taken with children to prevent obesity before it starts.

“There is not much evidence to suggest that fatness, at any case, is not always an indication of bad health in the same way that thinness is no signifier of good health” (Herald, par. 21). Because of this evidence, more emphasis should be placed upon actual health levels instead of on how thin a person is. With this change of emphasis, a great change would take place in today’s society. Doctors and psychiatrists do not take into account the fact that if the opinion of the society changed, those societal pressures for young children and adults would be eliminated. If body acceptance was promoted as much as fad diets are now, there would be no need for those fad diets. If people feel more comfortable with themselves, they would not be too ashamed of their bodies to get out and get active. With a changed attitude such as this, it would also eliminate the problems with eating disorders. Eating disorders start typically with a distorted body image. If children were brought up differently, with their parents teaching them to love their bodies, the growing problem of child obesity would also be eliminated. However,

dieting industries prevent today's society from changing because of the massive account is has on our economy.

The diet industry is a multibillion dollar industry. With as much progress it provides to today's economy, no wonder doctors ignore some of the evidence found that may stop people from actually wanting to diet. The National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance strives for having governmental guidelines that the diet industry should have to follow with all aspects, including advertising and having to give warnings of harmful effects. People should be more informed of the risks they are taking by going on whichever particular diet they choose and what other options they may have instead of that diet.

The NAAFA plays a key role in changing today's society. Members and others who attend conventions for the first time report after leaving that they felt they had no flaws and were quite satisfied with their appearance. They also report that they were the happiest and most comfortable they had ever been while at the NAAFA convention.

Overweight and obese people are the members of one of the only groups left who are acceptably discriminated against. By the government and people who make and influence laws continuing to ignore the problem with fat discrimination, they fuel organizations, such as the NAAFA, true purpose. When people begin taking more of a stand against this discrimination against obese people, obesity will become more accepted. Although health risks are present with obesity, as well as being present with people suffering eating disorders, body acceptance should be more promoted. With the acceptance of oneself, changes would be seen that would eliminate many or all problems with health issues. Body acceptance promotion has already begun in advertisements by

companies like Dove. Their advertisements feature real women product users and these women are of all sizes and ethnicities. With the changes already beginning for body acceptance and promotion of high self-esteem, why not see the real value in loving who you are, no matter how big or small?